

Miller shows he is firmly in control

After saying he may retire,
Senate president continues
to drive debate in Annapolis

BY JENNIFER SKALKA

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Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. started the political season with a seemingly accidental slip of the tongue.

He said he wouldn't run again after his four-year term expires in 2010. For a lesser politician, the statement would have signaled the beginning of the end of his influence in Annapolis — and the start of lame-duck status.

But those who have watched Miller lead the Senate over the past three months — as he almost single-handedly stymied plans to expand health care, create the Chesapeake Bay Green Fund and back public campaign financing — know that he will not roll over. Not for anyone or any issue.

Though Maryland has a new Democratic governor, Miller has in many ways driven the debate in the 2007 session, which ends tomorrow. He has set up a 2008 showdown on his pet issue — legalizing slot machine gambling — as well as proposed tobacco, sales, gas and income tax increases. As Miller has sounded a warning about the state's projected \$1.5 billion budget shortfall, senators have fallen in step behind his behind-the-scenes order not to pass bills this year that cost more than \$250,000.

Prime among them is a House of Delegates health care plan that would have expanded coverage to more than 100,000 Marylanders by doubling the tax on a pack of cigarettes to \$2. Miller stood in firm opposition, saying any money from a tobacco tax should be used to tackle the budget crisis.

Some colleagues see in Miller — the longest-serving Senate president in the country

— a reflection of Lyndon Baines Johnson, who was known as a U.S. senator for his bullying but effective ways. Miller appreciates the comparison.

"I'm a student of Lyndon Johnson," said Miller, 64. "I'm a student of Winston Churchill also. I'm a student of Napoleon. I'm a student of Alexander the Great. I'm a student of Julius Caesar. I'm a student of Douglas MacArthur."

In other words, he won't leave Annapolis without a fight. And a victory.

Miller, a Democrat who represents Prince George's and Calvert counties, said his priority is one of fiscal prudence — a mark of his long-term leadership record.

But Miller's focus on slots is also evidence of the senator's power over the legislative debate. The appetite for slots in Annapolis has diminished considerably since Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. failed to shepherd a proposal through the General Assembly. So the talk about slots — with House Speaker Michael E. Busch's stalwart moral opposition an obvious looming obstacle — speaks volumes about Miller's influence. And persistence.

Alternately feared and respected by colleagues, Miller is, since winning the Senate presidency in January 1987, the capital city's power broker extraordinaire. He manages to direct deliberation toward those issues that concern him — and halt discussion of others.

"Mike is the kind of person who doesn't have to talk about his power," said John Stierhoff, a Baltimore attorney and lobbyist who was Miller's chief counsel and adviser for a dozen years. "He has it. He knows when to use it, and more importantly, when not to use it. That is a sign of a true leader."

Some observers speculate that he is Gov. Martin O'Malley's proxy on the tax issue, forcing the discussion so that O'Malley doesn't have to. Miller, they say, is likely also holding back the health care debate until the governor is ready.

"Mike came to Annapolis this year with one thing on his mind — that was not to spend money this year," said former Sen. Michael J. Collins, a Democrat who served for 16 years. "You can say Mike blocked health care reform for this year, but I think another way of saying it is that he stood

up for fiscal sanity."

The Green Fund — an initiative to tax developers to raise money to clean the Chesapeake Bay — has also met its end on the Senate side. The governor had indicated that he would have supported it.

Del. Maggie L. McIntosh, a Baltimore Democrat who sponsored the proposal, said Miller's strategy is to hold back enough bills that matter to members that they fall in line next session on a broad revenue package.

"He wants to build up the pressure so there's one big boom," McIntosh said.

But McIntosh said the House has pushed proposals that address policy matters and also bring in cash. She believes Miller's opposition is shortsighted.

"Excuse me, these bills make money," she said. "They don't spend money; they make money."

Busch said he is frustrated by the holdup. "In the final analysis, the disappointment is that we've done nothing comprehensive on health care and the most significant environmental issue has been left unaddressed in the Senate of Maryland."

Another measure felled by Senate inaction would have closed a widely criticized tax loophole for developers. And on Friday, the Senate defeated a costly proposal for public financing of legislative campaigns.

Miller has also appeared to let some other measures move forward, including a proposal to replace the state's voter machines and another to require state government contractors to pay a "living wage" to workers. But the voter machine bill requires the state to find money next year, and the living wage compromise addressed Miller's concerns about the impact on rural areas.

Miller disputes any suggestion that he keeps his members in line as a purely Machiavellian exercise. He said he has his eye on the pressing task at hand — balancing the budget — and that everything else is secondary.

"Contrasted to a speaker of the House of Delegates" — the position, not Busch personally, Miller stresses — "I use very, very little of the power that these members allow me to use."

He added: "I'm like a jockey on a horse, and I'm very light with the reins. I mean extremely light on the reins. And they will tell you



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that. I let policy flow from the back of the room forward."

But in a debate on a bill that would effectively shut down Towson University's M.B.A. program, his sway was obvious. The legislation indicates that the Maryland Higher Education Commission violated a landmark U.S. Supreme Court civil rights ruling by allowing majority-white Towson to join the University of Baltimore in offering the degree. Nearby Morgan State University — a historically black school — has a similar program.

After much discussion, the measure failed by a single vote.

But Miller picked up the phone and discreetly made a call from the podium. Moments later, Sen. Robert J. Garagiola, a 34-year-old Democrat known to some colleagues as "the Anointed One" for Miller's decision to make him chairman of a key health subcommittee, stood and asked that the vote be reconsidered. In an instant, the Senate gave its stamp of approval, a victory for Morgan State.

Miller and Garagiola said they didn't remember the call — but several senators saw Miller's handiwork in the bill's reversal. Garagiola said only: "I was aware that there was an interest to have that reconsidered."

The Senate president said he believes there is some synchronicity between his personal life and Senate leadership role. Miller, an attorney who lives in Chesapeake Beach, is the oldest of 10 children.

"I've had to work with my younger brothers and sisters and realize that they go first, and I go last," he said. "I go last. And I'm their servant also. I deal with them. I work with them. I stroke them. I let them have their day in the sun."

This year, the often frank Miller has been exceptionally blunt. Call it Mike Miller Unplugged.

Sen. Katherine A. Klausmeier, a Baltimore County Democrat, has a "PTA voice," Miller said during a recent floor debate. When freshman Sen. James C. Rosapepe of Prince George's County joined a photo opportunity with the University of Maryland championship women's field hockey team, Miller compared the Democrat to a former senator with a penchant for showmanship. "Frank Shore is alive and well, folks. What do you think?" Miller cracked.

All the joshing aside, Miller is al-

ways direct when it comes to slots, which he believes could eventually raise \$800 million a year for the state. The session may be almost over, but O'Malley, Miller said, had better start pushing the issue. Miller sees slots as a fiscal and political necessity — and he has started grumbling about the need for a special session to deal with slots, taxes and potential budget cuts. The discussion is inevitable, he said, harking back to the 1992 budget battle, which pitted friends against one another but also led to important fiscal reforms.

"He campaigned on it," Miller said of the governor and slots. "So guess what? Blue-collar Democrats voted for him, just like blue-collar Democrats voted for Bob Ehrlich on this issue. Because the people in Anne Arundel County, people in Baltimore County, people in Western Maryland and on the Eastern Shore, they want this issue."

O'Malley declined to be interviewed for this article. But he said in a statement that he looks forward to tackling the state's fiscal needs, though this session has "been about competence and compromise."

"After session, this administration will go about the business of finding cost savings and making our state government more efficient," he said. "And we look forward to working with both houses to develop a comprehensive solution to the state's structural deficit."

Despite his focus on fiscal re-

sponsibility, Miller said he doesn't want to be remembered only for slots and taxes when he eventually steps down.

"The power to tax is the power to destroy," he said. "It should be used very sparingly, and I'm willing to use it because we are in a predicament. I don't believe I caused the predicament, but at the same time I'm the person in charge who needs to help us get out of the predicament."

After he addresses the state's financial woes, then maybe will he retire, head to his second home in Florida and hit the golf course. Well, perhaps. Seated in his office, a plate of tuna salad in front of him and church bells ringing outside his office, Miller hedges. He later acknowledges planning two fundraisers this summer, one in Baltimore and another at his house.

"I'm definitely not going to be president of the Senate after this four-year term," he said. "I'll say that positively, unequivocally."

Then he wound his way to a caveat. "If called upon, I could run again for the Senate seat, but I have no plans to do so."

Not yet, anyway.

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THOMAS V. MIKE MILLER JR.

Senate President, Democrat,
District 27, Calvert and Prince
George's counties

Born: Clinton; Dec. 3, 1942

Education: University of
Maryland, B.S., business
administration, 1964; University
of Maryland School of Law, LL.B.,
J.D., 1967

Background: Maryland Senate
president, 1987-present,
member of Senate since January
1975; member, House of
Delegates, 1971-1975

Family: married; five children, 10
grandchildren

Source: Maryland Manual,
published by the Maryland State
Archives